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"GROUPS WORKING WITHIN"

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RALPH D. ERICKSON

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INTRODUCTION

The idea called, "Encounter Groups" or "T-Groups," reached its peak at the turn of the decade (of the sixties), yet many people are just now beginning to assess the relevancy of such groups. But all the time we are aware that groups exist and function all around us. This generation is more group conscious than any previous generation in history. No matter what aspect of life we are dealing with, whether it be the church, politics, business, education, or the new forms of communal families springing up, we find we are dealing with groups. Even in the area of morality, we find we are confronted with concepts of social or group morality rather than a personal morality of a previous generation.

The group has always been important, however. First the family, the clan, the tribe, the guild, the community, and the state were used as instruments of government, work, fighting, worship, recreation, and education. Clearly there always have been and always will be groups, as long as man survives on this planet. But I am using the word in a special sense, that of the planned or programmed use of small groups for the purpose of learning, growth, or the accomplishing of tasks as they relate to the community of the church.

Primarily, I am interested in the developing and use of groups within the Christian community as they witness and minister to the larger community.

I. THE HISTORY OF GROUPS WITHIN THE CHURCH

For centuries the church has served to build meaningful relationships and was in some respects the forerunner of what is today known as "Group Therapy."

The underground church or the early church began in the first century with small groups meeting secretly in homes, sharing each other's concerns, and partaking together of the bread and wine in remembrance of their Lord. We have only to read the record of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles to see the effectiveness of this Spirit-filled fellowship:

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ...and all who believed were together and had all things in common;...And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42, 44, 46-47).

They were together; they ate together; they prayed together; they shared a common life and worship; and through the winsomeness of their fellowship the Lord worked. The effective power of God was most truly felt in the intimate face-to-face Christian fellowship. There was power in the Christian fellowship. There was and is, power in the face-to-face, intimate group of people who share a common commitment to Jesus Christ. This power is more than the power of numbers. The power in the Christian church is the power of the Holy Spirit. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt.

16:20). As the church, the group possesses a beauty and power which none of its individual members possess. Collectively its members become the body of Christ doing His work in the world.

One important aspect of the church is that it is a group, the local manifestation of the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It is a group because it is composed of interacting personalities. It is a number of people in reciprocal communication. How many people and how effective the communication between them will depend upon the church, the life of its members, the frequency and nature of its meetings, and many other factors.

God has called into being a new community in the world, a community actualized in many local situations. Its group character is emphasized again and again in the New Testament where it is referred to as "the people of God," "the household of faith," "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." This new community of the Spirit came into being at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon a committed group of believers. It exists as a community not for its own sake, but for the redemptive purpose of God. The group and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the group are both essential aspects of the church. Both aspects come together and are not in sequence.

Group life is the very nature of the church because of the nature of Christian commitment. Those who are committed to God in Christ are by the very fact of the commitment committed to love those whom God loves. They are committed to participation in the fellowship, the church. Most often the church is involved

in attempting to provide an atmosphere for witnessing, growth, and fellowship, of which the small group is the most effective method. The organization of the church is generally around the small group, such as boards, committees, choirs, study groups, and other functional groups. The work of the church is most effectively accomplished by the smaller working unit that shares the responsibilities together.

It wasn't until modern times that groups received the scholarly attention due them. Compton and Spencer in the 19th century were interested in the mob, the public, and mass movements. Durkheim around the turn of the century observed that a group product emerges that cannot be explained in terms of individual mental processes.¹

One could readily compare the old revival meetings with modern therapy groups where people gather for marathon sensitivity sessions. Frances Trollope writing about revivals held in Cincinnati in 1832 says: "When the room is full, the company of whom a vast majority are always women, are invited, entreated, and coaxed to confess before their brothers and sisters all their thoughts, faults, and follies. These confessions are strange scenes; the more they confess, the more invariably are they encouraged and caressed."² The modern trend toward religious

¹Harold B. Knowles and Paula Knowles, Introduction to Group Dynamics (New York: Association Press, 1959), p. 2.

²Philip W. Larson, Games You Can Play," Church Management, 1973, pp. 16-17.

revival offers a great outlet for the expression of one's innermost feelings.

"At the turn of the century Dr. Elwood Worcester of Emmanuel Church in Boston began special classes for those afflicted with TB. Modern group therapy classes are often composed of homogeneous groupings of persons with ulcers, asthma, allergies, or cancer. The classes of Dr. Worcester eventually led to the Emmanuel Church Movement of Health classes and was aided by Dr. Samuel McComb and one of America's first psychoanalysts, Dr. Isidore Coriat. The movement in early 1908 was criticized by an editorial in the Journal of the New York Medical Society."³ Since that time the intensive type therapy groups have functioned in a variety of settings. They have operated in industries, universities, churches, government agencies, educational institutions, and penitentiaries.

Some time prior to 1947 Kurt Lewin, a famous psychologist working at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with his staff and students, developed the idea that sensitivity training could be used for training in human relations skills as an important type of education in modern society.⁴

Another phase of the movement toward intensive group experience was developing at about the same time at the University of Chicago, using it as a tool of training for personnel counselors of the Veterans Administration.⁵

³Ibid.

⁴Carl R. Rogers, Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 2.

⁵Ibid., p. 3.

Today the underground church is starting the process all over again, with the merging of new worship and study forms. Catholic theologian Michael Novak has estimated that many thousands of Americans are members of the two thousand to three thousand underground church groups across the nation. These groups are made up of both Catholic and Protestant members, plus those who are not aligned with any particular church group. Often they regard the underground church as the only acceptable bridge between the established church and the futile attempt to be a Christian apart from any organized church group.⁶

The relationship between the organized church and these informal groups, which arise from time to time seeking to bring about a deeper spiritual experience, is an important concern. It is time that the Church begin to treat these groups with understanding and welcome them into the fellowship, remembering that the Church is continually in need of an awakening and a renewal of spiritual concern. Now and then a group arises that is not basically in line with historic Christianity; or it may begin so, but veer in unhealthy directions. However, most of these groups are not heretical in any sense. They are doing Christ's work, honoring His Name and winning people to Him. Sometimes these groups are local and unknown, meeting in houses and offices as well as churches. Although they are often out of touch with the organized church or other groups, they have the need of fellowship with other Christians. Frequently criticism of these groups is

⁶Joan Thatcher, The Church Responds (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1970), p. 18.

caused by jealousy over the success of the group. A troubled conscience may be experienced by some because of their inability to relate to the new spiritual enthusiasm.

What is needed today is for the church to see the challenge of the small group and the possibilities of awakening the people within the church to once again reach those who may be outside of the church and disappointed over the lack of an awareness of the Spirit's presence. We need to again realize that the church is where the Holy Spirit is, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name," and that the church is what God considers it to be and not necessarily as we have defined it. To exclude the vitality and genuine concern of these new groups is a loss, both to the church and to the groups themselves. These new groups need the breadth, balance, wisdom, and sacraments of the organized church. The church needs the call to renewal that these groups can bring to it.

II. THE USE OF GROUPS WITHIN THE CHURCH TODAY

Today the church is rediscovering the true meaning of Koinonia. This emphasis upon the small group has within the last decade been an increasing part of the life of the churches. We can quite easily identify a group that is sacred in content, such as a Bible study class, a midweek prayer meeting, or a worship service, because they are all dealing with theological material. But what do we do about groups such as the local P.T.A. study groups, a great books discussion group, or a therapy group? For me, the renewal of the church depends upon the small group that is both sacred in structure and sacred in content. It is not enough to just meet the psychological needs or to meet for social action purposes. The church must have a spiritual purpose and basis also.

Through the developing of small groups in the church, motivation to become involved is increased and responsibility is shared among a greater number of people. There is a freedom to participate and an experience of acceptance. The most effective way to overcome the gaps and barriers to communication within the church is to develop the small groups within, and use them as listening ministries for persons in need of knowing that someone is interested enough in them to hear them out. The many and various types of training programs within the church can use the group method to equip its people for mission projects or specific action projects.

Today's religious revival and church renewal is best shown by

the tremendous variety of programs being carried on in the ministry of reaching communities of people for Christ. The one common denominator is the use of group forms in the development of these new and varied ministries.

A. CONTEMPORARY CHURCH PROGRAMS.

Some of the more noteworthy churches using groups in the development of their programs are as follows.

1. Judson Memorial Church of Minneapolis has shifted its canvas and visitation program to what they call "Parish Jones," where the members of the church gather monthly in clusters to discuss the current and projected concerns and life of the church. This same structure is used to involve the members in interfaith community action projects, and in planning creative worship experiences. The most obvious change in the church's worship program came when the services began including dialogue sermons, and involving the people in the presenting of the message. In addition, the church now has a three year small group study program for new members.¹

2. Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village of New York has for some time now been experimenting with new forms of ministry involving people from the arts. Their program has its emphasis on relating to and listening to a group of people often overlooked by most of our traditional churches. They have such activities as a dance theatre, programs of chamber music, and drama.²

¹Thatcher, Church Responds, p. 29.

²Ibid., p. 35.

3. St. Peter's Lutheran Church of New York has developed a ministry to the Jazz Community, built around listening to people of that community and then providing them opportunities for vocational worship. The emphasis of the program is one of building bridges between the church and a people with a spiritual need.³

4. Second Baptist Church of Los Angeles, California, has a ministry which centers around a renewal of small groups. Immediately upon becoming a member, each person is brought into a small group for the purpose of involvement and growth. These small groups have grown into a ministry called "Renewal Center Group Ministry." This Renewal Center Group Ministry of the church has branched out to provide a counseling ministry in the community and a group retreat program.⁴

5. "The Church of Our Savior in Washington, D.C., may be one of the best forms for new wineskins at the moment. One of their secrets has been the formation of small mission groups dedicated to one specific task or project. Such concentration is easily caught and understood by most persons. This style of involvement is in sharp contrast to most church boards and committee structures where long hours are spent in meetings on detailed or theoretical matters. Little feeling or motivation is generated by the abstract and theoretical level of the meetings. Hence, motivation and interest decline for many members expecting nothing more than the same review of the 'minutes of the last meeting' at the next meeting."⁵

³Ibid., p. 42. ⁴Ibid., p. 48.

⁵Nathan W. Turner, "Adult Groups, Leadership, and Renewal," Baptist Leader Magazine, August, 1971, pp. 44-48.

Other churches are using the small group structures for such purposes as politics and protest, family-to-family fellowship programs, race relations programs, and for talk-back sermons. The one thing that stands out in all of these ministries is the fact of the small group basis.

B. RENEWAL OF THE TRADITIONAL

The church needs to see its task as a developmental process in group life and provide for it in every area of the educational and witnessing programs. Some of the possibilities may be the following.

1. CONTACT GROUPS - To provide opportunity for persons to meet informally without any "strings attached." This might include such types of meeting as informal coffee hours, church brunches, or maybe just informal discussion situations.

2. SOCIAL GROUPS - To provide opportunities for people to relate to others with a little more structure, but without a heavy responsibility. This type might include such groups as Breakfast Discussion Groups, Men's Fellowship Groups, Ladies Aid, or possibly a neighborhood Bible study.

3. INTEREST GROUPS - To provide opportunities to develop commitment and responsibility around a common concern. This type might include a Sunday School class, a project group, a field experience, or maybe a church ball team.

4. FELLOWSHIP GROUPS - To provide opportunities to commit one's life to both a group of persons and a specific task to which the group is committed. This type might include such groups as a

more serious Bible study group, a senior citizen group, a choral group/choir, or in today's setting it could include such things as a coffee house ministry.

5. MISSION GROUPS - This type is generally a group which has developed a sense of fellowship with intensive concern for a specific mission. Along this same line I would include the prayer group type of meeting. Another type that should be included is the adult Sunday school class (young adult, women's, men's) that undertakes as a class project some form of community or church service project such as:

- a. Visiting of new employees of a business.
- b. Series of luncheons for employed women.
- c. Easter breakfast for youth.
- d. In-training to be lay leaders to fill pastorless churches.
- e. Providing automobile rides twice a month to elderly persons.
- f. Visiting of the elderly.
- g. Providing of counseling.
- h. Maintaining of a telephone network for elderly or shut-ins.
- i. Assuming care for physical plant of church.
- j. Serving annual ecumenical breakfast.
- k. Providing Christian literature to local depots.
- l. Providing financial assistance for youth going to summer camp.
- m. Providing a special ministry to military and college youth.⁶

6. HUMAN RELATIONS GROUPS - To provide opportunity to expand the breads of one's life in personal and interpersonal skills, and in leadership roles. Many of our churches today are promoting and providing inter-church and inter-racial human relations groups for their members, as a means of Christian challenge to growth and

⁶Wayne C. Clark, "Widening Our Church Fellowship," Baptist Leader Magazine, August, 1955, p. 43.

awareness.

7. THERAPY GROUPS - To provide opportunity to find oneself in the context of understanding and personal development. Many of the previously mentioned groups provide this type of supportive role. Some of the most effective groups in this area have been the caring neighborhood Bible studies or the in-depth prayer groups.

"The pivot experience in the group life is at the point of fellowship. That precedes it, if it is successful and develops increased trust, will feed into it. What succeeds it, if full realization of leadership and personal integrity is achieved, feeds back into the fellowship--with new leadership, stronger participation, and in-depth concern."⁷

There are other areas within the church program where groups play a major role. These might include the following:

a. WORKSHOPS: Workshops are suitable for groups of ten to twenty persons who wish to increase their skills in a particular field and are looking for new tools in order to be more creative and effective in their area of responsibility. Workshops can also be used to present special concerns and needs. Communication workshops can be used to develop lines of communication between youth and adults who are willing to listen and discuss with each other. What most towns don't have and churches could provide are people trained to communicate and listen. The gap between the ages is not primarily an age gap, but rather a communication gap.

⁷Robert A. Dow, "Human Relations in the Church," Baptist Leader Magazine, October, 1970, pp. 13-14.

Workshops are effective in working with teachers, deacons, trustees, mission study leaders, youth workers, and ministers.

b. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: Christian education is a term that includes all that we have been talking about, but it also has a specific connotation to me that refers directly to the structure of a Sunday school, a Sunday evening youth program, vacation church school, special study programs, and summer camping programs. Whatever the reason for the existence of a group, from church school classes to outdoor classes at camp, before it can become a real group it must have a common purpose or goal which will bring the individuals together. Perhaps it is a problem which exists within the church; it may be a community problem; it may be a keen desire on the part of a few to deal with and act upon a current human rights issue; it may be a real need to come to grips with oneself in relationship to other people; or it may be a desire for Christian growth and understanding. Whatever the reason is for the group, the level of success will depend on the effectiveness of the group to provide an accepting fellowship for growth and learning.

c. EVANGELISM: Evangelism also is a term that refers to much of what we have been talking about, but it also should refer to a specific thrust or motivation for a large part of what is done within the context of the church. Fellowship evangelism is a way of using fellowship study and service groups of the local church to win people to Christ and the church. Instead of having to set up special programs or special committees, groups already functioning can be used. Leaders of Bible classes, sewing

circles, choirs, or couples clubs should be acquainted with the possibilities of making fellowship evangelism one of the purposes of their existence.

C. PRINCIPLES OF DEVELOPMENT.

Whatever the particular aspect of the church's ministry we might be confronted with, small groups can play a role in providing avenues of renewal. Small groups are excellent for identifying and developing leadership, solving problems in human relations and promoting Christian growth.

If we are to create "the mind of Christ" in our local congregations, we must learn how to speak to one another. We must know from each other: Where you are? Where do you stand? What's stirring within you? One good way of doing this is to share in Bible study together, to compare what we find there and what it means to each one of us.

Study groups within the framework of the church utilizing lay persons as leaders and participants need to keep in mind concepts of group dynamics to make the best use of the group process.

a. The more frequent the interaction between people, the stronger in general their sentiments of liking or affection for one another.

b. The more times group members do things together, the more likely they are to increase the number of activities they carry out together.

c. Control is inherent in the whole system of relationships and friendships, not in the leader alone.

d. As the frequency of social interaction decreases, the standards of the group become less well defined and less strongly held; thus leadership becomes less firmly established. The result is disintegration.

III. THE USE OF GROUPS WITHIN THE MILITARY

The ministry to young adults in the military and especially research to find adequate programs for this ministry, require revolutionary thinking and action. However, this revolutionary thought and action will not be effective unless there is a change in our measurement of success. The question is what is success and in whose terms?

One of the obvious things we must recognize is that the military chaplaincy is related to and a direct expression of the civilian community. What is not so obvious is that there are peculiar characteristics of the military chaplaincy that are quite different from anything the civilian community might experience. The circumstances under which we have contact with the young military man or woman, and the command relationship and support to provide a religious program for the soldier is quite unique. The military chaplain works within a much more integrated community and, as such, his program must reflect a much broader and more practical concern than would be demanded of his civilian counterpart. This program is basically directed at the young adult, but must also include all aspects of the military community.

Upon entering the military service, the young adult leaves behind him his family, close friends, associates, school, church, and all the supportive relationships they provided. Overnight he finds himself in a totally new environment. Depersonalization

begins immediately upon reporting for duty and continues as hair styles and uniform styles are matched to the standard measurement. The chaplain must initially minister to a group of disillusioned, lonely, and frightened youth who are searching for meaningfulness in their new environment. These youth are the parishioners for whom the chaplain is responsible.

Any program undertaken to reach these young adults must take into consideration the basic needs of this particular age group.

- a. We must express an understanding of their worth as persons in the military structure.
- b. We must provide an outlet for their need to give of themselves in service.
- c. They must be given a chance to express their fears and concerns relative to theological and sociological changes.
- d. We must help them to achieve a sense of belonging.
- e. We must help them realize we are not phonies, but servants of One Who cares and, because He cares, we care, too.
- f. They have a need to see an example of one dedicated and committed to God. The life we live is still our greatest performance, our best sermon.¹

A. DEVELOPING GROUPS IN THE MILITARY

Whatever is found to be effective in ministering to the young adult must take into consideration the tremendous social changes, the technological advances, and the strong impact of the new sub-cultures. As we study existing successful attempts at new structures, we note a two-way "traffic." The new structures of ministry to the nonlistening world have been initiated by a committed

¹Staff Report, "Directions for a Young Adult Ministry," Randolph AFB, Texas, 1965, p. 108 (mimeograph).

disciplined "koinonia" who have engaged themselves in study, prayer, fellowship and resulting service. The new ventures have in turn allowed the koinonia groups to become even more committed to Christ and to one another in the Spirit.

In order that our attempts at developing new ministries not become empty innovations, we must be concerned with the depth of the chapel program as a "koinonia-in-service." We must not think that only the chaplain himself is capable of being used in developing meaningful ministries. From a practical standpoint the chaplain must seek ways of enlisting others; first, because he cannot do all that needs to be done; second, because they need the experience of involvement and service. They already have gifts that need to be offered in service. Their gifts may include such abilities as "guitar player and folk singer," "tutor to the slow learner," "baseball fan and ball game companion," "stamp collector and sharer of philatelic knowledge," "auto mechanic and the guy who will help you with your car," "a WAC who knows a city's history and conducts a really swinging tour," "a painter who can show you how to paint without numbers," etc.²

These people are in the chapel congregation. We need to form with them meaningful avenues of involvement for expression of their talents and concerns. This also means some real risks on the part of the chaplain. Are we really willing to allow laymen to take a responsibility, or express a voice in the program? Are we ready to listen to what these young people have to say, and to accept them for who they are? We may have to allow the seemingly

²Ibid., p. 111.

secular and the seemingly sacred to work side by side.

Some of the traditional, problem related, areas of working with the military community would include group counseling, drug counseling, marital counseling, AA groups, and unit rap sessions. Although these are not directly related to the religious program, they do become means of developing lines of communication with the larger community.

The traditional methods used in the religious program would include those already mentioned in chapter II, but geared to settings for the young soldier, the engaged soldier, the newly married soldier, or the career soldier and his family. Whatever the setting is to be, guidelines should be set up so as to insure the best use of time, interest and talent.

- a. Identify a common interest or need.
- b. Develop topics.
- c. Set goals for learning activity.
- d. Select appropriate resources (speakers, films, etc.).
- e. Select appropriate approaches and techniques.
- f. Outline each session and the various responsibilities to be carried out.³

B. NEW STRUCTURE POSSIBILITIES.

When we think of new structures by which to reach the young soldier, I think it important to not overlook many of the things we normally use, but this time change the setting and bring the

³"Small Group Approaches with Soldiers," Protestant Committees' Resumes, USLCHS, Fort Hamilton, New York, May 1971, p. 25, (Mimeograph).

content up-to-date.

1. RETREATS: Retreats continue to hold the greatest promise for outreach and adaptability to a variety of purposes. Capitalize on the "group instinct," and the desire to go places with their buddies. The retreat capitalizes on getting away from activity in the world in order to deepen the spiritual life, to study, to spend extended time in thoughtful prayer and meditation. Young adult retreats can provide an atmosphere for the person to look at himself unhurriedly, thus providing one an opportunity to think seriously about his life, vocation, and God's will for his life. Retreats provide an opportunity to think seriously about the need for growth in knowledge of the Christian faith and in the Scripture. Retreats can take on both the aspects of service and fellowship by combining a weekend of community service with a weekend of Christian fellowship at a church campgrounds or at a church itself.

2. COFFEE HOUSE MINISTRIES: City churches are with some success operating coffee houses as centers for dialogue. Here young adults can meet to talk. Events of cultural, social, and religious nature are programmed, but not on a regular basis. Programs vary and some are more structured than others. Some have facilities for study groups, or provide a meeting place for action groups engaged in volunteer social work. This can be a breeding place for constructive efforts in Christian witness. Christian coffee houses have proved themselves as an effective means of communication with young adults in many different situations.⁴

⁴Staff Report, "Young Adult Ministry," p. 105.

3. **SMALL GROUPS:** Congregations have successfully organized small groups as a means of reaching young adults for some time. This type of group may meet regularly with a serious commitment for participation in a group sharing experience of Christian discipline and growth. Most groups set a membership limit at ten. A key to their success is grouping by interest and in the small size of the group. Small groups may be attempted in the form of: discussions in the day rooms, book groups in the library, coffee house in the Service Club, discussions following films at the theatre, and family life conferences in the Service Club.

4. **MEN OF THE CHAPEL:** There are a variety of possibilities to be explored in setting up a "Men of the Chapel" program. For the smaller unit it can be the means of developing a once-a-month breakfast program or providing a group to sponsor some special project.

5. **CHAPEL COFFEES:** One of the greatest needs is that of the young married couple. There is a real ministry to be offered by providing "coffees" for the wife of the young soldier, making it possible for her to become part of the military community. At the coffees she is able to make friends and secure helpful information about things which she may need to know. I would suggest that programs be developed to include both the husband and wife and to hold the program during the work week.

6. **FOREIGN WIVES LANGUAGE CLASS:** Another area that is very much in need is that of assistance for foreign wives of the servicemen. Language classes could be set up and developed along with a Foreign Wives Fellowship group. This may have possibilities

for developing groups with couples of inter-racial marriages also.

7. NEIGHBORHOOD BIBLE STUDIES: One of the most successful programs I have witnessed is that of the neighborhood Bible study for women. This provides an opportunity for study and growth as well as supportive friendship.

CONCLUSION

Whatever aspect of the Christian ministry we have been given to do, I feel we will be most effective by using small groups in face-to-face experiences, sharing our Christian faith and concern. In developing groups within the military chapel program, the following should be considered:

1. The military chaplaincy is particularly suited to developing innovative ministries using groups.

2. The environment of change and mobility in which we live and work demands of us a greater sensitivity to the needs of young men and women than would normally be required in a civilian parish.

3. Any ministry that is to be relevant to the needs of people must include them as participants and leaders.

4. The spiritual needs of the individual and the basic message of the gospel remain the same. What we must look for are new wine-skins.

5. Legitimate objectives and purposes must always be an influence in developing any ministry to the military community.

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Ralph D. Erickson
Chaplain (maj) USA